

**LEADERSHIP IN SHAKESPEARE’S JULIUS CAESAR
WITHIN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE**

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Abstract

The present paper is a text analysis on Shakespeare’s “Julius Caesar” from the point of view of leadership lessons to be inferred. The accent lies on the fact that, although a historical play, Julius Caesar is deeply rooted into the Elizabethan realities of Shakespeare’s time, therefore it addresses the issues of the day. However, the great problems tackled there and the general language of humankind that Shakespeare uses turns “Julius Caesar” into a play for all times, modern throughout generations present and future.

Key words: leadership, Julius Caesar, Elizabethan age, humankind, inferred lessons.

Introduction

Deemed as a historical play, *Julius Caesar* cannot be closer to both Shakespeare’s time and ours. When it comes to its being related to the 16th century, Shakespeare chose this character because he wanted to make a point as to the situation in the British monarchy of the day.

Like all historical events or times depicted into art, mainly visually, it is the present history that we are presented, rather than the “historical history”. Just like with our theatre plays or movies today, it is our present time that we are encapsulating, not the past one, which becomes a mere pretext. In *Julius Caesar* Shakespeare was basically praising the Elizabethan ruling by stating that any monarch, even a dictatorial one, is better than chaos.

On the other hand, what makes *Julius Caesar* so appealing to us, to our present days? The answer is that great writers like Shakespeare have always dived into the human at its most defining features; they have taken the pulse of humankind not of a single person.

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Julius Caesar makes no exception to the rule as it touches upon topics of universal interest; friendship, ambition, duty, fate, deceit, betrayal, revenge, illusion versus reality, power, success and leadership are among those best represented here. No matter how tempting all of them may be, in the next part of the paper the focus will be on leadership.

1. Shakespearean Leadership

Depiction of kings and rulers makes the object of Shakespeare's historical plays, although not restrictively, but still occupying a vast amount of his work. Different kings in different eras, all of them creating a panoply of top aristocrats in charge of leading the country and creating an array of leadership styles. Yet all of them are human, none of them is perfect, Henry V, although the hero of Agincourt, is still exposed as a man with blood on his hands; Richard II, although a weak and almost incapacitated king, is of poetic inclination; Richard III, whether hunchbacked or not in reality, had to be a villain to account for the loss of his crown in favour of Henry VII, grandfather of Queen Elizabeth I whose subject Shakespeare was.

As already mentioned, Shakespeare's preoccupation with leaders and whatever is linked to leadership is ubiquitous in all his plays. Probably it has to do with the changing and insecure times that he lived through. Let us not forget that, at the time, England was experiencing profound changes, both religiously and politically. Hundreds of years of Catholicism were decreed away by Henry VIII who appointed himself head of the Church of England, while his daughter Elizabeth would become, after several twists of events, the first queen (the accent being on "female") to rule England on her own.

Julius Caesar is, ultimately, an ode dedicated to Elizabethan monarchy, an undisguised support for the absolute ruler whom Shakespeare associates with order and prosperity. The end message of the play is that any form of ruling, even tyranny, is to be preferred to chaos.

2. Leadership traits in Julius Caesar for the Elizabethan age

According to Dr. Ismail Serageldin, there are three "burdens" of leadership: power, justice and responsibility. Power needs to be expressed within a system of values and away from the temptation of tyranny; justice which means not only to enforce the law, but make sure that the law is equally fair to everybody and responsibility which should accompany leadership by default (Serageldin, 6-7). *Julius Caesar* will stray away from these 'burdens' and will pay the ultimate price for it. By analyzing the homonymous play, let us see if there is any moral to be inferred by the ruler of the day, Queen Elizabeth I.

If we were to look at the eight chapters alone in Phillip Barlag's book, we could draw a map of the leadership traits displayed by *Julius Caesar*, the Roman ruler: 1. Lead with Power, not Force 2. Lead from the Front 3. Defy Convention 4. Bet on Yourself 5. Keep the Lines of Communication Open 6. Co-Opt the Powers of Others 7. Preempt your Enemies 8. Invest in Your Power Base (Barlag, Contents).

The next part of the paper will attempt to identify some of these traits as revealed by the text of *Julius Caesar* and the image that Shakespeare projects upon a generic leader embodied by several characters in the play, depending on how the plot unfolds. According to some critics the play

offers the analysis of “three failed leaders: Caesar, Brutus and Anthony.” (Davis, 99). Whether they are failed or not, there are lessons to be learnt from Julius Caesar and his enemies or friends. However, not in a didactical manner, and this is why the play is so vivid and still appeals to us as it must have to the Elizabethan public. The play is a permanent oscillation between personal and public interests (Fortunato, p. 98), which makes it true to life, closer to us and our daily endeavours - the characters may fringe on myth without losing the human dimension.

2.1 The fearless ruler

Shakespearean leadership encompasses power, resolution, ambition, unwavering decisions, basically a male mindset and, above all, the one of an absolute monarch. This is exactly what Barlag means by the *Lead with Power* lesson mentioned above. The iconic Shakespearean ruler is a true warrior, in the good tradition of knights in shining armour whose bravery and courage are boundless – Caesar defines himself as being more dangerous than danger itself (see the quotation below). Let us not forget that Shakespeare was experiencing *Gloriana*'s time, therefore he was chanting in praise the view unfolding before his own eyes.

CAESAR

*The gods do this in shame of cowardice.
Caesar should be a beast without a heart
If he should stay at home to-day for fear.
No, Caesar shall not. Danger knows full well
That Caesar is more dangerous than he.
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, II, 41-5)*

The dichotomy cowardice – courage is pressed on with for both idea content and stylistic effect; nobody dares a front attack on a valiant leader. In her turn, Queen Elizabeth I was the target of several attempts on her life, one of the most bearing on her reign being the *Babington Plot* in the context of Catholic support for Mary, Queen of Scots. In the end Elizabeth had to execute her cousin, not without qualms of consciousness, to which Shakespeare's point of view must have looked like a public reassurance.

CAESAR

*Caesar shall forth. The things that threatened me
Ne'er looked but on my back; when they shall see
The face of Caesar, they are vanished.
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, II, 10-2)*

The accent on courage and the fearless ruler is so strongly articulated, that some lines have become proverb-like quotations:

CAESAR

*Cowards die many times before their deaths;
The valiant never taste of death but once.
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, II, 32-3)*

The exceptional qualities in a leader grants them unquestionable right to absolute ruling. *Julius Caesar* is not about principled leadership, like in *Henry V* where we find “a sophisticated

example of enlightened ethical leadership” (Herbel, 266), but rather about what entitles a ruler to the crown. This being another issue with which Elizabeth I was faced as Henry VIII’s daughter resulting from his controversial second marriage. It is true that, according to history, Julius Caesar pays with his own life for aiming too high, but, according to Shakespeare, the well-intended retaliation, instead of restoring democracy plunges the country into civil war.

2.2 Generating followers

One of the main features identified with leaders as opposed to managers is the ability to create emulation. The personality of a leader should sprout followers. In today’s language, we would call them inspirational leaders:

LIGARIUS *Set on your foot,
And with a heart new-fired I follow you,
To do I know not what; but is sufficeth
That Brutus leads me on.*
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, I, 330-3)

Leading by repute transcends even death, because Julius Caesar, the title hero, actually dies in Act III, and the rest of the play is the confrontation between his true followers and the ones who used to be so. For the Elizabethan age this message could read like great leaders will always have offsprings even though not by blood. Their legacy is unperishable, their parenthood is beyond fathering children - Brutus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, was one of the murdering conspirators, while Anthony, a mere friend, defended Julius Caesar’s name sword in hand.

2.3 Determination

A leader should be consistent with their decisions, they should not hesitate or change opinion, thus offering their subjects a point of reference, a direction. This can be seen as another sign of power as defined by Barlag in his book.

CAESAR
*But I am constant as the Northern Star,
Of those true-fixed and resting quality
There is no fellow in the firmament.*
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* III, I, 60-1)

As a result, a leader’s decision needs to be unquestioned; their ‘will’ is good enough a reason for whatever line of action they have decided:

CAESAR
*The cause is in my will; I will not come.
That is enough to satisfy the Senate.*
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* II, II, 71-2)

This vision must have suited Elizabeth I, unaccountable to anyone, free to do as she pleases, she will disregard the Privy Council’s pressure to marry. As a matter of fact she greatly relied on her councilors’ advice, however this was mainly because Elizabeth I was an enlightened monarch. Critics purport that Shakespeare himself had read Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, but the idea that

seems to crystallize is that, once freed from public ethics, leadership can become more effective (Herbel, 267).

2.4 Choice of subordinates

Despite this image of greatness and indisputable power, there is good “advice” to be inferred, leaders should not listen to flatterers. In Barlag’s vision, this trait fits into *Invest in Your Power Base* lesson.

CAESAR

[...] *Be not fond*

To think that Caesar bears such rebel blood

That will be thawed from the true quality

With that which melteth fools: I mean sweet words,

Low-crooked curtsies, and base spaniel-fawning.

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* III, I, 39-43)

As mentioned before, Elizabeth I treasured the words of her councilors, but she expected them to be efficient – she reduced their number from fifty to eleven – and connected to reality - the British secret services beginnings can be traced back to Elizabeth I’s reign based on the activity of Sir Francis Walsingham².

Alongside flatterers, corrupted people must be banned. Brutus, who is an icon of honesty, is unflinching when it comes to reproofing unjust affairs. Corruption is out of the question for a leader and their collaborators as any vicinity of it spells self-destruction:

BRUTUS

Let me tell you, Cassius, you yourself

Are much condemned to have an itching palm,

To sell and mart your offices for gold

To undeservers.

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* IV, II, 61-4)

The plot itself could be seen from the perspective of how important it is for a leader to know intrinsic nature of his subordinates, as Brutus, though virtuous and honest, is manipulated into killing Caesar based on his indecisiveness (Tabers-Kwak, 56). Brutus’s flaw teamed up with Cassius’s discourse bring upon Caesar’s demise. Although Caesar openly dislikes Cassius because he has a “lean and hungry look”, he fails to see how he might be affected by him due to the weak link who is Brutus.

2.5 Conflict management

Leaders should be prepared to face all sorts of challenges, one of them being how much to reveal, what can be disclosed and how to avoid embarrassment. When confronted with such a situation, Brutus’s choice is to keep up appearances in front of the masses, doubled by a face-to-face discussion:

² <https://www.britannica.com>

BRUTUS

*Before the eyes of both our armies here,
Which should perceive nothing but love from us,
Let us not wrangle. Bid them move away,
Then in my tent, Cassius, enlarge your griefs,
And I will give you audience.*

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* IV, II, 43-7)

Saving appearances, playing your part, not revealing your true state of mind is a key concept for leadership, especially in politics. The balance between ‘to be’ and ‘to seem’ favours the latter when it comes to task-oriented leaders.

BRUTUS

*Good gentlemen, look fresh and merrily.
Let not our looks put on our purposes;
But bear it as our Roman actors do,
With untired spirits and formal constancy.*

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II, I, 223-6)

2.6 Detecting and exploiting opportunities

One of the most profound comments on when to make a move and take action can be found, again in Brutus’s speech explaining to Cassius why he thinks they should march towards Philippi to meet their enemy. A good leader should detect opportunities and use them; any hesitation might result in failure and, as we know, wasted opportunities have the tendency to retaliate. The fragment below has actually become a classical quote.

BRUTUS

*There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat,
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.*

(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar* IV, II, 270-6)

Queen Elizabeth I is, perhaps, the quintessence of opportunism, in a good sense. Her tottering over her throne, the insecure religious and political situation hammered her into caution and wisdom which resulted into a fine balance and one of the most stable ruling in British history. Transforming deficiencies into opportunities and exploiting them as such, shows leadership at its best. Her being a female and ruling on her own was deemed unacceptable at the time and even much later, however she managed it brilliantly, largely because it was exactly this card that she played. Not accidentally the next quote belongs to Portia as there is a fine line which connects her to Queen Elizabeth I as the former is considered by critics to be an icon of risk-taking and danger management (Lanier, 158).

PORTIA

I have a man's mind, but a woman's might.
(Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, II, IV, 8)

This quote strongly reminds us of The Speech to the Troops at Tilbury in 1588: *I know I have the body but of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.*³

Conclusion

A masterpiece of Shakespearean writing, thought and attitude, *Julius Caesar* ranks among the top 'must read' textbooks on leadership of all times. The lessons that could be inferred from this text match the value of the very character they were inspired from while being brought closer to us via a text imbued with meaning and readily approachable.

Although the main beneficiary of the day must have been the Queen Elizabeth I herself, as there seems to be no such thing as a historical play, all writings actually recording the time when they were produced, the modern reader is also a front line recipient. For this reason, it is only now that we could deem *Julius Caesar* as a historical play, since it reflects the Elizabethan age, which is now history in its true right.

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³ <http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html>

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